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A Conversation with the New Dean

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Left to right: Vice Dean for Academic Affairs Dianne Avery, Dean R. Nils Olsen Jr. and Vice Dean for Academic Affairs Peter R. Pitegoff

Special Features

A conversation with **the** **new Dean**

R. Nils Olsen Jr. was named to succeed Barry B. Boyer as dean of the University at Buffalo Law School, effective for the academic year 1998-99. UB Law alumni know him from his classes in civil procedure, environmental law and other areas, and through his active and highly visible work with the school's Environmental Law Clinic. UB Law Forum caught up with Dean Olsen recently to hear his thoughts about the Law School, the profession, and the future.

Dean R. Nils Olsen Jr. on the Law School and its future

Q. After 21 years on the faculty, what led you to consider becoming dean of the Law School?

A. I never consciously aspired to an administrative role. Over the past four years I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to work closely with Barry Boyer in implementing the Law School's New Curriculum and in adapting the Law School's programmatic and financial structure to conform with changes being made in the University. As a result of that experience and the support and encouragement of my colleagues, the opportunity of serving the Law School as dean was afforded me. UB Law has been extraor-

dinarily supportive of me during my career. This represents an opportunity for me to give back something to the institution, especially during these challenging times.

Q. You have introduced a new team approach to management of the Law School. Could you describe these changes and the rationale behind them?

A. Traditionally, the academic administrative contingent in the Law School has consisted of the dean and one vice dean for academic affairs. I greatly prefer a collaborative process in which important issues are fully discussed and in which there is as much input as possible from the faculty. Therefore, I have asked several faculty colleagues to assist in the governance of the Law School.

Peter Pitegoff and Dianne Avery are serving as vice deans for academic

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affairs; Peter is responsible primarily for the upper division; Dianne has taken on responsibility for the first-year program. In addition, they work closely with me on most of the administrative issues that we are confronting. Their assistance has been indispensable during the past months.

George Kannar also has agreed to serve as a vice dean. He has undertaken the herculean task of organizing and coordinating the rehabilitation of O'Brian Hall. With the legislative appropriation of \$1.8 million and the generous support of our alumni, this sorely needed overhaul has been made possible. Accomplishing it will be an extraordinarily demanding, multi-year task.

Finally, in recognition of the Law School's significant strength in interdis-

ciplinary teaching, I have requested that David Engel, director of the Baldy Center, Errol Meidinger, director of the Environment and Society Institute, and Isabel Marcus, chair of women's studies and co-director of the Woman and Gender Institute, work to develop and implement further interdisciplinary educational opportunities and focus on the potential for working with other law schools to create international programs.

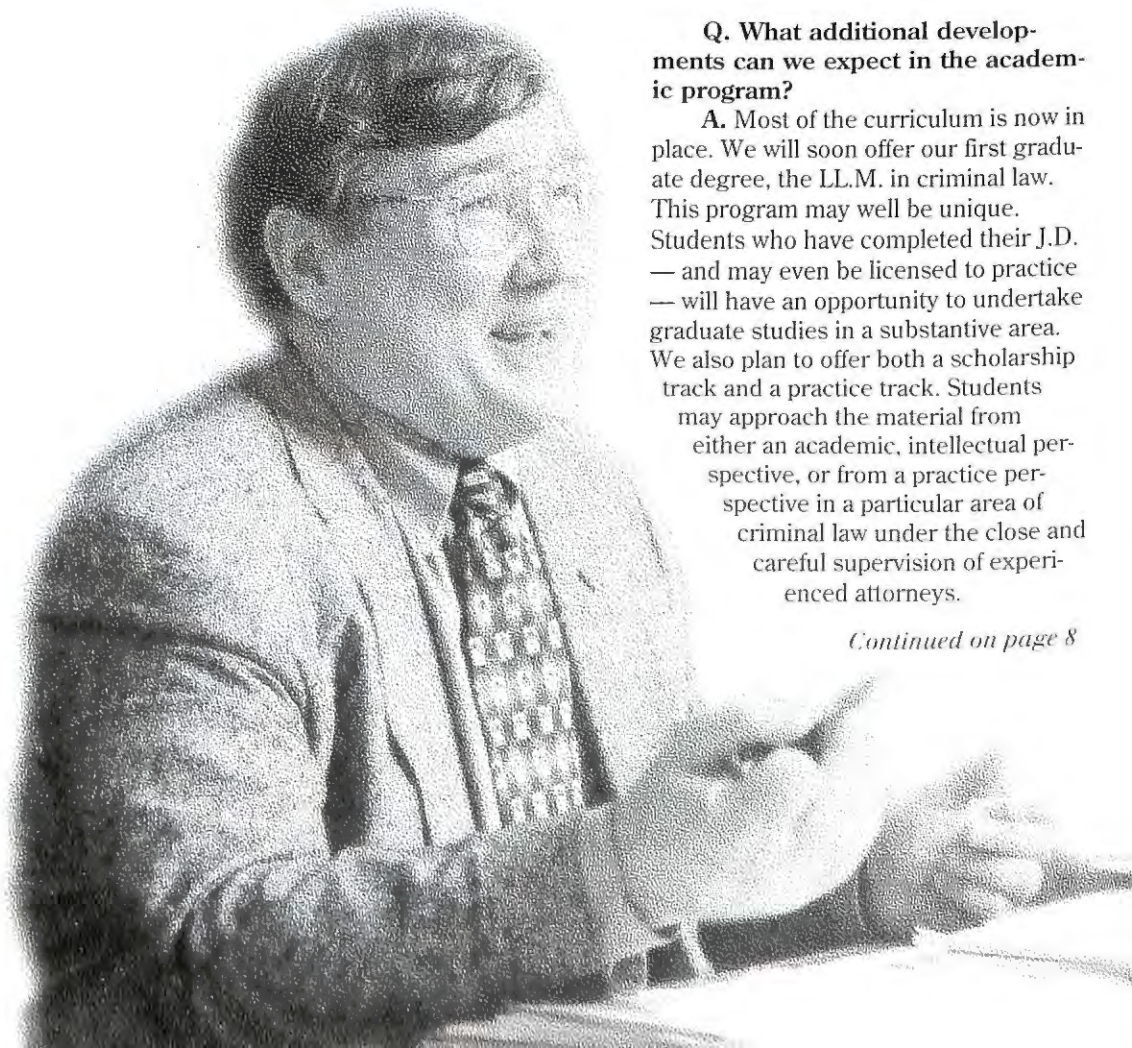
Q. The New Curriculum, which was introduced in 1995, has now been almost fully implemented. Has it fulfilled your expectations?

A. Very much so. It has been enthusiastically received by all the constituent elements of the Law School — students, alumni, legal employers, faculty, and the University administration.

Q. What additional developments can we expect in the academic program?

A. Most of the curriculum is now in place. We will soon offer our first graduate degree, the LL.M. in criminal law. This program may well be unique. Students who have completed their J.D. — and may even be licensed to practice — will have an opportunity to undertake graduate studies in a substantive area. We also plan to offer both a scholarship track and a practice track. Students may approach the material from either an academic, intellectual perspective, or from a practice perspective in a particular area of criminal law under the close and careful supervision of experienced attorneys.

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Olsen brings a background of legal education and practice

R Nils Olsen Jr., who was named dean of the University at Buffalo Law School Aug. 1, has overall responsibility for the development of academic programs, faculty recruitment and advancement, and for maintaining standards of teaching, scholarship and creative activity. He also has chief responsibility for planning and budgeting, equipment and space allocations, and personnel, and oversees development activities within the school and among its alumni and supporters.

"The Law School will benefit from Nils' exceptional credentials, academic achievements and administrative experience," said UB Law Professor and former Provost Thomas E. Headrick, who made the appointment. "The positive, unanimous recommendation from his colleagues and external constituencies is an affirmation of his ability to serve the school as dean."

Law Professor William R. Greiner, UB president, noted that Olsen "has done an outstanding job of serving the Law School in two key positions, that of vice dean for academic affairs and director of clinical studies. He has also played a major role in creating and implementing the Law School's innovative New Curriculum, which has greatly enhanced the school's educational program and is highly regarded nationally," Greiner said.

Olsen joined the UB Law faculty as an associate professor in 1978 after serving as a lecturer of law and clinical fellow at the University of Chicago School of Law. Prior to that, he was judicial law clerk to Chief Judge Thomas E. Fairchild of the Seventh Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, in Chicago.

As vice dean since 1994, Olsen has overseen the implementation of the school's New Curriculum, designed to help bridge the gap that has existed historically between law school and practice. He also has been responsible for long-range planning, evaluation and self-study, enrollment targeting and faculty recruitment, promotion and tenure.

In addition to his duties as vice dean, Olsen has served as director of clinical education for the Law School, maintaining administrative responsibility for the in-house clinical program comprised of nine clinical instructors who provide closely supervised, legal experience in diverse areas of practice to about 100 students each year. He also has continued his research in the areas of federal post-conviction remedies and environmental policy.

In his clinical teaching in the Law School, Olsen represented the plaintiffs in *Smith v. Coughlin*, a federal habeas corpus class-action lawsuit filed in the Western District of New York that challenged the significant delays that were prevalent on direct appeals of state criminal convictions. The case led to substantial changes in the oversight of such appeals in the Appellate Division and increased county funding of indigent appeals.

He also has represented numerous community-based, citizen environmental groups and several local municipalities in on-going environmental disputes, ranging from the proposed siting of hazardous-waste incinerators in Niagara County to assisting in the drafting of local land-use planning legislation. He was instrumental in the negotiation and drafting of a comprehensive agreement between a national hazardous-waste disposal corporation and Niagara County municipalities that resulted in a 15-year ban on applications for approval of hazardous-waste incinerators.

A 1974 graduate of the Columbia University School of Law, Olsen received a bachelor's degree with honors from the University of Wisconsin. He is a member of the Lewiston-Porter school board, and has served as a member of the boards of directors of New York State Environmental Advocates, the Youngstown Free Library and Great Lakes United. He and his wife Sandra, and their three children, live in Youngstown, N.Y. ■

“We expect to construct an effective and appropriate continuing legal education program for the future.”

Q. What changes can we expect administratively?

A. With the departure of Aundra Newell, who was responsible for admissions, recruitment, and student services, the Law School will be creating several new administrative positions.

First, we have hired a new associate dean for admissions and financial aid. Jack Cox, who comes to us from the University of Dayton Law School, is charged with creating a new, integrated, and more efficient and effective admissions system to increase the number of applications which the Law School receives. We will also hire a full-time recruiter who will establish close working relationships with pre-law advisers throughout the Northeast and who will attend numerous career fairs held for college juniors and seniors interested in attending law school.

In addition, we plan to hire an associate dean of students who will be responsible for working with the faculty to develop a strong and coherent academic support system for students who are experiencing academic difficulty. This individual will serve as the primary source of counsel and advisement on either personal or academic issues that are affecting students.

Q. New York State has now mandated continuing legal education for all attorneys. How is the Law School responding to this change in the profession?

A. The Law School has an interest in providing educational support to the practicing bar as well as to our current students. I have, therefore, asked Melinda Saran, director of our clinical education program, to begin the process of engaging the Law School in continuing legal education. We have recently submitted an application for accreditation as a provider of continuing legal education and we expect to work closely with various bar associations and alumni to construct an effective and appropriate continuing legal education program for the future.

Q. One of the biggest challenges facing UB Law is the decline in state

funding. How are you addressing this issue?

A. UB has traditionally been supported almost exclusively by New York State taxes. During the past five years this support has dwindled from almost 90 percent to less than 40 percent. At the same time, the Law School has been given access to its tuition income.

Between tuition income and state tax support, approximately 90 percent of the Law School's ongoing expenses are met. This has required us to undertake two parallel processes in a very short period of time. First, it has been necessary to increase tuition to help fund our developing program. Because of the importance of assuring access to all qualified individuals to the state law school, these increases have been measured and have been kept as small as possible.

Second, we must do more to encourage philanthropy directed to the Law School. We will find new ways to strengthen our relationships with alumni and friends to help us deal with the new economic realities. I am grateful that our efforts so far have been well received, and our alumni are providing critically needed support for the Law School.

Q. The University will soon be embarking on a major capital campaign. How will the Law School participate, and what will be its goal?

A. Each school within the University will participate in the most ambitious capital campaign in UB's history. The Law School's goal will be \$12 million. We have recently completed a case for support that sets forth many of the areas in which resources are needed. These include the development of need-based and achievement-based scholarships, support for the New Curriculum, support for our excellent faculty to ensure that we can retain them despite competition from institutions with considerably more resources, and support for capital improvements to O'Brien Hall. To date, we have received commitments of close to \$4 million from alumni. We expect to make the formal public announcement of the campaign, its goals, and its leadership in the fall of this year.

Q. In recent years, the Law School has improved its national rankings. How important is it for the Law School to do well in these annual rankings?

A. It is an unfortunate fact of life that the popular rankings of law schools have taken on a disproportionate importance in the public perception of the quality of legal education. It has been well documented that these rankings are essentially subjective and in many instances compare institutions with vastly different resources, goals, and programs.

Notwithstanding their many flaws, it is because of their increasing importance to prospective applicants that the Law School has made every effort to improve our rankings, by increasing the amount of funding available to support our program, by attracting the most qualified students, and by enhancing other areas on which these rankings focus.

One recent ranking which is perhaps a little less subjective is the faculty publications ranking that is published by Chicago Kent, Illinois Institute of Technology. That study is based upon the number of citations of faculty scholarship. In this ranking, UB placed 10th among public law schools and within the top 30 overall.

Q. As a public institution, UB Law School has always been committed to access. How can the Law School ensure continued access in a time of rising costs and rising tuition?

A. One of the most important rationales behind the University at Buffalo as a state law school is to ensure that there is a source of high-quality legal education for any student with the ability to earn the degree and practice law. As the tuition at the Law School has risen, it has become incumbent on us to develop additional scholarship assistance. We are hoping to have a fairly significant scholarship program in place by the beginning of the next academic year. This will be supported by both our annual campaign and the capital campaign

mentioned earlier.

Q. The Law School building is now 25-years-old. What are your priorities for this aging facility?

A. As with any publicly funded campus, building maintenance at UB has been a victim of budgetary constraints. This lack of maintenance has quickened the aging process of the wonderful facilities provided at John Lord O'Brian Hall.

We were very fortunate last year, with the assistance of many dedicated alumni and friends, to obtain a \$1.8 million appropriation from New York State to begin the process of refurbishing the Law School. In addition, capital improvements are an important element of our ongoing capital campaign. Between the two, along with additional support from the University, we anticipate that a fairly extensive overhaul of the building and its facilities will be completed within the next three to four years.

To demonstrate our commitment to our students, we recently completed a significant remodeling of our first-floor student lounge with the financial support of BAR/BRI Bar Review. The lounge is an understated, comfortable, yet professional environment accessible only to law students. In addition to the handsome furnishings, we were fortunate to obtain the loan of several pieces of fine art from Armand Castellani and the Castellani Art Museum. The facility is already open and is being used by our students.

One exciting project that we are undertaking is the remodeling of the large courtroom facility in the Law School into a modular, state-of-the-art courtroom that would accommodate both appellate and trial proceedings. We have received strong expressions of interest from the Appellate Division, 4th Dept., the New York State Supreme Court, the United States magistrate judges, and others to conduct judicial proceedings here once this facility has been completed. This will provide an extraordinary educational experience for our students and integrate the civil justice system into the SUNY-system's only public law school. ■